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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL WOES AND SOLUTIONS IN GABES

REF: TUNIS 10

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The southern coastal town of Gabes is one of the primary industrial zones in the country. While chemical factories have provided jobs boosting the local and national economy, resulting pollution has severely damaged the local ecosystem and posed health risks to the population, who express dismay that while the rest of Tunisia enjoys significant tourism investment, Gabes has in essence become a dumping ground for Tunisia's chemical industry. While the GOT has in recent years conducted environmental assessments, and is currently embarking on a EU/World Bank funded clean-up, there is little chance that the industrial character of Gabes will change. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Situated on the south-eastern coast of Tunisia, Gabes is the 15th largest city in Tunisia, with a population of approximately 120,000. Gabes is the only coastal oasis in the world. In the past three decades, the region has seen extensive industrial growth involving chemical/fertilizer, cement and brick factories. Much of the local economy is also driven by agriculture, including date palms, and olive and fruit trees. Local residents are quick to point out that there has been no government-assisted investment in a local tourism industry, despite Gabes' beautiful coastline, and location at a crossroads between the fertile north of Tunisia and the southern desert. During a recent trip to the region, numerous Gabesians, both working-class and intellectuals, told Poloff that there had been a trade-off: that while the rest of the country would be devoted to tourism, Gabes would be a largely industrial site, in essence, a dumping ground for Tunisia's dirty, but economically necessary chemical industry. (Gabes is second to Sfax in industrial pollution emissions.)

¶3. (SBU) Several interlocutors mentioned that, if lost to a change in the town's vocation, the approximately 2,000 jobs created by the chemical and cement/brick factories in the Gabes area would easily be absorbed if the region's tourism sector was developed. A former mayor of Gabes noted that with "four or five nice hotels on the beach, all the chemical factory workers would be employed." Gabesians pointed to multiple negative side-effects of industrial pollution in the Gabes area including fish kills and ecological damage in the Bay of Gabes, water and air pollution, and significant health problems among residents, such as elevated cancer rates and skin, dental and intestinal problems due to excessive air pollution. Poloff noted several Gabesians with pervasive dark stains on their teeth, allegedly due to elevated levels of flourine in the body from chemical production emissions. However, according to a 2001 report from the UN Industrial Development Organization, measures taken to reduce air pollution in Sfax and Gabes, including improved filtering systems, resulted in a 65 percent reduction in sulfur oxide and an 80 percent reduction in ammoniac discharge since the late 1990s.

¶4. (SBU) Although air emissions from chemical plants have had negative side effects on public health in Gabes, international environmental groups have been more concerned about the dumping of phosphogypsum, an acidic by-product from phosphate fertilizer production, into the Gulf of Gabes. A recent study by the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) and the World Bank pinpointed the Gabes region as one of the most polluted in the Mediterranean Basin. According to a Greenpeace study, between 1970 and 1995 the state-owned fertilizer plants in Gabes pumped more than 60 million tons of phosphogypsum into the Gulf. A study by the University of Tunis found massive levels of toxic or carcinogenic chemicals contained in phosphogypsum such as lead, copper, and zinc that had been dumped into the Gulf of Gabes since the early 1970s. The level of cadmium, a heavy metal toxin, was 16 times higher in 1995 than the maximum allowed by Tunisian legislation. According to Tunisia's former Greenpeace representative, the toxic dumping led to "a warm, toxic, soup of heavy metals" and a "dead-zone" of 20 square miles in the sea around Gabes.

¶5. (SBU) Under increasing international and domestic pressure, in the late 1990s, the GOT announced new initiatives to lower levels of pollution and conduct assessment studies of environmental damage. In 2004, the Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership (FEMIP) sub-division of the European Investment Bank signed a EUR 45 million finance contract for a pollution abatement project in the Gulf of Gabes. The project covers several anti-pollution measures, in particular the management of phosphogypsum. The waste generated will be transported in solid form by train to an isolated land-based site where it will be covered with an impervious layer of clay. Metering and recording equipment will be employed to monitor accidental seepage that may come from the landfill area to ensure compliance with international environmental standards. Also in 2004, the GOT and the World Bank agreed to co-finance an intensive environmental assessment of the Gulf of Gabes marine and coastal resources. This project will "develop mechanisms for the integrated biodiversity management of the Gulf of Gabes and identify long-term institutional and technical resources required to reverse the current trend of biodiversity degradation."

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Environmental woes were on every Gabesian's mind during a recent reporting trip to the southern city (reftel). Despite the local internationally-financed clean-up projects, and a bold GOT national environmental protection strategy aimed at corrective actions and preventive initiatives, few people we spoke with in Gabes gave the GOT any credit for sufficiently addressing the problem. Only our GOT interlocutors in Gabes were aware of the World Bank/EIB initiatives. Short of the closure of the Gabes fertilizer plants, it is likely that many Gabesians, who long for a clean, tourism-based local economy, will remain discontent. Needless to say, with chemical production representing 15% of Tunisia's exports, the Gabes chemical industry will continue. The GOT has however recognized that ignorance of the harmful environmental effects of this industry in the past has led to significant and in many areas, irreversible damage, and has begun measures to address these problems. Continued vigilance and attention is necessary should Tunisia hope to balance the often conflicting goals of chemical production and environmental protection.

HUDSON